

A Place for Art



Charles A. Platt

Architect Of The Lyme Art Association Gallery



F R O N T E L E V A T I O N



Fishing Boats, etching by Charles A. Platt 1881
Private Collection

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Cover Image. Portrait of Charles A. Platt, Oil
By Thomas W. Dewing 1893 Courtesy of Platt Family

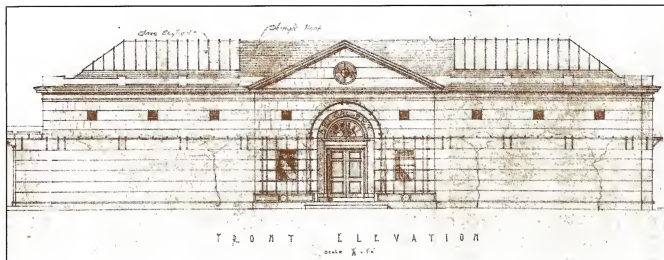
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A Place for Art

Charles A. Platt

ARCHITECT OF THE LYME ART
ASSOCIATION GALLERY

October 28 - December 3, 2005



As a boy, Charles Platt loved to paint and draw. Two great-uncles were artists/engravers and early mentors for a boy with an artistic bent. John Henry Platt, his father, was a corporate attorney in New York City who fostered artistic interests at home. In 1847 John became a charter member of the Century Association, a society of "one hundred gentlemen engaged or interested in letters and the Fine Arts." He introduced many interesting guests to his family including William Cullen Bryant, Frederick Law Olmstead, Eastman Johnson, and Sanford Gifford.

Charles's mother, Mary Cheney Platt, came from a silk manufacturing family based in Manchester, Connecticut. Summering in Manchester with his Cheney relatives exposed Charles to major architects of the time. Henry Hobson Richardson had designed the Cheney Block in Hartford, Connecticut and Sanford White had designed residences in Manchester, Connecticut for two of Mary's uncles. Charles grew up drawing and painting among a family fluent in the letters and the arts.



Figure 1. Charles A. Platt (standing at left) and friends in Paris studio 1885
Courtesy of the Platt family



Figure 2. *The Etcher*, oil painting by Charles A. Platt 1885
Collection of the St. Botolph Club, Boston, MA

In 1878 seventeen-year-old Platt enrolled in the National Academy of Design in New York City. Here students drew from casts of antique sculpture and after several weeks, drew from life. In 1879 he also enrolled in the Art Students League to study painting with Walter Shirlaw and William Merritt Chase. In the summer of 1880, Platt went to Gloucester, Massachusetts to study etching with Stephen Parrish, father of Maxfield Parrish. Platt produced his first etching of Gloucester Harbor later that year. In 1881 Platt joined the New York Etching Club and exhibited six etchings at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

In 1882 twenty-one year-old Platt sailed for Europe to study art in Paris and to travel. He spent his first two years studying art in exhibitions and museums and working in his Paris studio (Figure 1). Other artists broadened his range of knowledge in the Dutch school of painting, particularly in the works of Franz Hals. In the fall of 1884, he enrolled in the Académie Julian to study life drawing with Gustave Boulanger and Jules Lefèvre. Platt's oil painting *The Etcher* was exhibited in the Paris Salon of 1885 (Figure 2). Platt had dressed a model in his own work clothes and placed him in a corner of his own studio. It was Platt's first attempt at the figure. Even though Platt continued his etching, painting became his focus.

In 1885 Platt met Annie Corbin Hoe while she was traveling abroad with her parents, Colonel Richard and Mary Hoe of New York. In February 1886 Platt joined the Hoe family as they toured Italy. Charles and



Figure 3. Charles A. Platt studio, Cornish, NH
Courtesy of Richard W. Cheek

Annie were married in Florence on April 10, 1886 after Charles recovered from nearly fatal typhoid fever. Then in June Annie's father died and the family immediately returned to New York. Other family tragedies ensued: Charles's father died in August of that year and on March 18, 1887 Annie died giving birth to twin daughters who also did not survive.

A grieving Charles Platt remained in New York City, comforted by family. A relative of Annie's recalled, "Every night, for months, Charles came up to our house...listening at the door to learn if we had any visitors; and if there were none, we sat there talking of Annie."

The first summer after Annie's death, Platt went to Gloucester with artist friends Dennis Bunker and Henry Walker. He was elected to the Century Association in 1887. In 1888 Platt exhibited work in the National Academy of Design, the Art Institute of Chicago and the New York Etching Club. In the summer of 1888, he went to Holland alone. During the exhibition season 1889, the "Complete Etched Works of Platt" were exhibited at the Wunderlich Gallery in New York City, and Platt's paintings hung in the National Academy of Design, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and the Art Institute of Chicago.

In the summer of 1889, two years after Annie's death, Platt's good friend Henry Walker invited him to Cornish, New Hampshire to sketch. Augustus Saint Gaudens, Thomas and Maria Dewing, Stephen Parrish and his son Maxfield, and Daniel Chester French were all settled in Cornish. This group formed an active, creative community that sustained and welcomed Platt. During this visit Platt designed a summer home for Walker.

In 1890 Platt purchased property in Cornish and designed a house and studio (Figure 3) for the site. His love of the hip-roofed villas and gardens of Italy found expression in his home. He continued to etch and paint and also designed houses and gardens for fellow artists in Cornish. The Renaissance villas that he studied in Italy influenced the placement and design of these residences. Although his designs were admired and led to further commissions, Platt concentrated his efforts on his landscape paintings.

In 1891 Charles's youngest brother William was studying landscape architecture with Frederick Law Olmstead who emphasized natural, rustic designs. Since Charles believed that William's training lacked classical elements of landscape design he proposed a tour of Italy with William to photograph and sketch Renaissance gardens. Early in 1892, they set sail. They studied gardens



Figure 4. *Hedge Walk, Quirinal Gardens, Rome*, watercolor by Charles A. Platt 1892-93
Collection of the Century Association

near Florence and Rome, and photographed and sketched over twenty sites (Figure 4). Tragedy struck again that summer when William, after returning to America, drowned while vacationing in Maine.

Eighteen ninety-three was a productive year for Platt. Two paintings and seventeen etchings were exhibited at the World Columbian Exhibition in Chicago and Platt won medals in each category. On July 13, 1893 he married Eleanor Bunker, widow of Dennis Bunker, an American landscape painter, in her parents' home in Boston. And *Harper's Weekly* published two illustrated

articles by Platt on Italian gardens.

In 1894 his book *Italian Gardens* was published. It was the first publication on the subject in English. As architects and artists gained influence in landscape design, Platt's preference for classical rather than romantic form gained followers.

In 1896 Charles won an award from the American Society of Painters for his landscape painting, *Clouds*, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. As financial concerns grew with the birth of their first child Sylvia, Platt's focus began to shift. Impressed with



Figure 5. Garden by Charles A. Platt for Larz Anderson estate Brookline, MA 1901
 Courtesy of The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities

Italian Gardens, friends of Eleanor's family commissioned Charles to design their house and garden in Needham, Massachusetts. After Platt designed two more residential commissions in Cornish, he was approached by Charles Sprague, a Massachusetts Congressman, to develop a landscape design for Faulkner Farm, his estate in Brookline.

In 1897 Charles Lang Freer, a Detroit industrialist and art collector, recommended Platt to develop a master plan for a residential neighborhood in South Detroit. The Platt's second child William was born that

year, and the third child Roger was born the following year. In 1898 Platt changed his occupation listing in a New York directory from "artist" to "architect."

Owners of several large estates commissioned formal gardens (Figure 5) which sent Platt back to Italy in 1901 for sculpture and architectural elements. On his return, Platt began work on four substantial residential and landscape designs.

In 1902 Platt designed his first public commission, the Maxwell Memorial Library in Pomfret, Connecticut. He designed residences in Michigan, Rhode Island, and New York. In 1904 an article by Herbert Croly entitled "The Architectural Work of Charles A. Platt" appeared in the *Architectural Record*. The Platt's fourth child Geoffrey was born in 1905, the same year Platt designed the Studio Building in New York City for the Astor Estate office. In 1907 Platt designed a double townhouse on East 65th Street for Sara Delano Roosevelt and Mr. & Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt (Figure 6). By 1912 Platt's buildings were in Illinois, Washington, Ohio and Washington, D.C.

The Architectural Book Publishing Company published a *Monograph of the Works of Charles A. Platt with an introduction by Royal Cortissoz* in 1914, the same year that Platt's fifth child Charles was born. During that year, Charles Lang Freer commissioned Platt to

design a major museum in Washington, D.C. for his collection of American and Asian art. Freer's collection included major works by Dewing, Homer, Metcalf, Sargent, Tryon, Thayer, and Whistler, including the famous Peacock Room, which James McNeil Whistler designed.

At a dining table in New York City's Plaza Hotel, Freer sketched his idea for his museum. Platt worked diplomatically with his enthusiastic client and designed the Freer Gallery of Art, located on the south side of the Capitol Mall, not far from the Washington Monument (Figure 7). An Italian Renaissance style granite exterior surrounds an interior marble atrium open to the sky. Three arches mark the main entrance and relieve the strong horizontal facade. Spacious, airy galleries with cove ceilings are well lit with carefully designed skylights. Each skylight consists of an exterior glass and an interior "diffusing glass." In between are movable louvers that can temper the light to suit the objects on exhibit. An air circulation system between the exterior and interior skylights provides moisture and temperature control for the Washington climate. Urgent telegrams from the museum throughout construction show Platt's attention to detail. Platt sorted through linen samples to find the perfect wall covering and borrowed an Asian scroll to determine correct humidity levels.

In 1914 Platt volunteered to design an exhibition gallery for the Lyme Art Association that had recently been incorporated by artists of the Lyme art colony in Old Lyme, Connecticut. The early Lyme artists had boarded for many years at the home of Miss Florence Griswold who deeded a portion of her property for this gallery to the LAA for the sum of one dollar. This project, like the Freer Gallery, was delayed by material and labor shortages during World War I, so that both galleries were under construction at the same time. By 1920 the blueprints were ready and with Lawton Parker as Chair of the Building Committee, the Lyme Art Association opened in August, 1921. *The New York Times* described it "as an embodiment of art in harmony with its natural surroundings." Although small in scale and shingle-sided, the design includes large, sky lit galleries and a classical arched entrance, echoing Platt's larger museum designs (Figure 8).

The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. was founded in 1869 "to promote the American genius." When U.S. Senator William Clark left his art collection and salons from his New York mansion to the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the museum commissioned Platt to design a major addition.

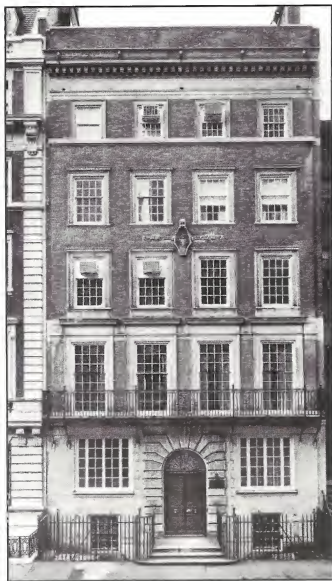


Figure 6. Roosevelt townhouses, New York, NY 1907
Courtesy of Richard W. Check

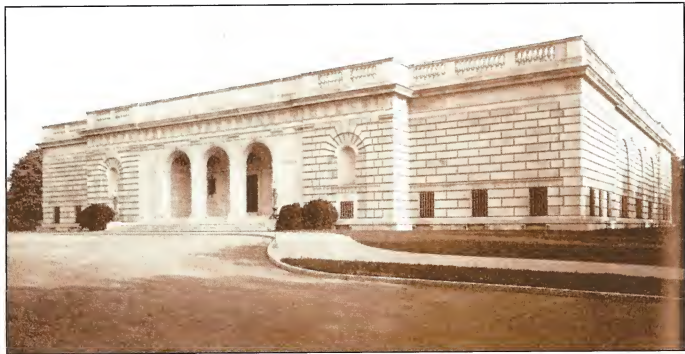


Figure 7. Entrance façade, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 1923
Courtesy Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution

The exterior design of the Clark Wing blends seamlessly with the original 1897 design. The interior galleries are classical and luminous with skylights. Platt was as meticulous in details as in overall design. He supervised the installation of rooms from Clark's New York mansion, he determined the choice of finish for Clark's grand oak staircase. When the Fragonard ceiling from the Salon Dore started to chip during installation, Platt received a desperate telegram asking for help.

In 1928 Platt designed the Lyman Allen Museum, which stands on a hill overlooking the Thames River in New London, Connecticut. He designed the

neoclassic granite building to house a fine collection of European and American art. The property is adjacent to Connecticut College (formerly Connecticut College for Women) for which Platt designed the library and an administration building.

During the 1920s, work for universities absorbed more of Platt's time than did work for museums. He served on the advisory board that developed the Homestead campus of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore; he was consulting architect for Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, and for University of Rochester in New York.



Figure 8. Lyme Art Association Gallery, opened in 1921, the oldest continuous art colony in America
Courtesy of Adrien Broom



Figure 9. University of Illinois library interior 1927
Courtesy of the University of Illinois library archives

In 1921 Platt was appointed institutional architect of the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana at a time when university enrollment had quadrupled.

Using the existing campus axis, Platt designed red brick Georgian buildings with limestone trim sited along tree-lined walkways. The buildings conformed to a three story limit accented with stately chimneys. In the university library, two massive staircases connect the lobby to the naturally lit main reading room on the second floor (Figure 9).

Also in 1921, Phillips Andover Academy in Andover, Massachusetts contacted Platt to work out a master plan for the campus, including exterior and interior building designs and landscaping. An existing academy building designed by Charles Bullfinch suggested the basis of Platt's Colonial and Georgian red brick designs. Platt designed George Washington Hall an administration building, Paul Revere Hall dormitory, the Commons, Oliver Wendell Holmes Library, the Addison Gallery of Art, and the Cochran Chapel. He removed buildings, moved roads and buildings and created malls and walkways echoing L'Enfant's plan for Washington, D.C. Platt's success at Andover led to consulting work at Deerfield and Northfield Academy in Massachusetts and Phillips Academy, Exeter, New Hampshire.

Figure 10. *A Calm Afternoon*, oil painting by Charles A. Platt 1885
Collection of the Century Association



Few of Platt's Italianate gardens survive today. Many of his urban designs and country homes still stand—classical, graceful and inviting. His museums and campus designs continue to reflect Platt's airy, bright, spacious and restrained aesthetic – all hallmarks of Platt's designs. Both the Freer Gallery of Art and the Lyme Art Association continue to celebrate the vision of Charles A. Platt: high cove-ceilings with solid walls form galleries evenly lit with carefully designed skylights; classical elements provide restrained decorative design both inside and out; centered arched entrances divide the strong horizontal lines of the exteriors.

In the Renaissance tradition, Platt's buildings are human in scale, entrances are emphasized and centered. Classical aesthetics address 20th century needs with grace, balance and restraint in the gifted hands of artist and architect, Charles Adams Platt.



Figure 11. Portrait of Charles A. Platt 1923
Courtesy of the American Academy of Arts & Letters

Chronology of Charles A. Platt 1861-1933

- 1861** Born on Staten Island, NYC, October 16
- 1878** Studied drawing at National Academy of Design, NYC
- 1879** Studied painting at the Art Students League, NYC
- 1880** Studied etching with Stephen Parrish in Gloucester, MA
- 1881** Joined the New York Etching Club; exhibited in Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts
- 1882** Traveled in France; rented a studio in Paris; exhibited at New York Etching Club, Society of Etcher-Painters, National Academy of Design, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and Boston Art Club
- 1884** Enrolled in the Academy Julian; studied with Gustave Boulanger and Jules Lefebvre
- 1886** Married Annie Hoe in Florence, Italy
- 1887** Joined Century Association, NYC and Society of American Artists; March 18, Annie died in childbirth; twin daughters did not survive
- 1889** *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Etched Works of Charles A. Platt* published by deVinne Press, New York
- 1890** Purchased property in Cornish, New Hampshire; designed house and studio
- 1892** Traveled to Italy to study and photograph Renaissance gardens



Rye, Sussex, etching by
Charles A. Platt 1884
Collection of Robert Arrowsmith



Chapel for American Military Cemetery,
Suresnes, France 1927
Courtesy of U.S. Commission of Fine Arts

- 1893 July 13, married Eleanor Harper Bunker
- 1894 *Italian Gardens* published; changed occupation listing in NYC from “artist” to “architect”
- 1904 Article by Herbert Croly, “The Architectural Work of Charles A. Platt”, published in *Architectural Record*
- 1913 *Monograph of the Works of Charles A. Platt with an introduction by Royal Cortissoz* published by Architectural Book Publishing; designed Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
- 1916 Appointed to United States Commission of Fine Arts, responsible for public architecture, sculpture, landscaping and monuments of Washington, D.C.
- 1919 Elected to American Academy of Arts and Letters; designed WWI headstone for Arlington National Cemetery; Hanna Building, Cleveland, OH; Homewood Campus, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD
- 1920 Designed gallery for the Lyme Art Association, Old Lyme, CT
- 1921 Appointed master architect for University of Illinois; named consulting architect for Phillips Academy, Andover, MA
- 1925 Designed Clark wing of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
- 1926 Named consulting architect for Dartmouth College and University of Rochester, New York
- 1928 Elected President of the Century Association; elected President of the Board of Trustees, American Academy in Rome
- 1933 Died September 12; buried in Manchester, CT

Comments from the Curator

JEANNE LEDOUX-STEWART

*M*any people shared their talents and knowledge in the creation of this exhibition. I would like to particularly recognize the expertise of Dr. Keith N. Morgan, Chair, Department of Art History at Boston University and noted Platt scholar, who suggested wonderful resources for information. His books provided a foundation for this exhibition: *Charles A. Platt, the Artist as Architect*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985; *Italian Gardens by Charles A. Platt; with an overview by Keith N. Morgan*. Sagaponack: Sagapress, Inc., 1993; and *Shaping an American Landscape*. Hanover: Dartmouth College, 1995.

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Old Lyme, CT
Bill Vose, Vose Gallery, Boston, MA
David Ward, Essex, CT



Charles A. Platt in his Cornish Studio c. 1893
Courtesy of the Platt family

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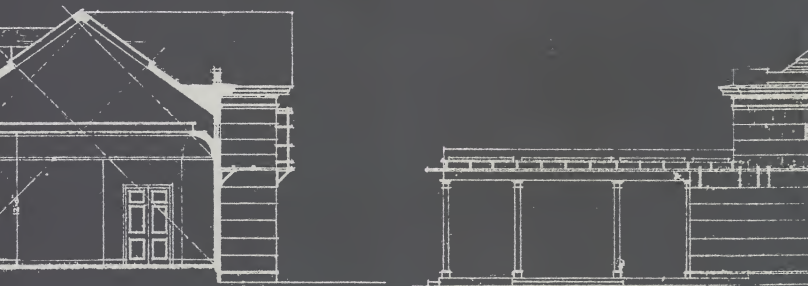
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